

April 20, 2022

Re: Testimony Regarding Fiscal Year 2023 Budget for Montgomery County

Carlean Ponder, Testifying on behalf of the Mental Health Committee, Silver Spring Justice Coalition:

In July 2022, the country will provide a national three-digit number, 988, as an alternative to 911 for calls involving mental health and substance abuse. To provide a true alternative to 911, and thus law enforcement in the role of health care delivery, we request a County budget that funds first responders who are most qualified to respond to crisis calls. This includes robust funding for mobile crisis teams, community de-escalators, and peer support, especially for people with disabilities and youth.

Currently, 3 mobile crisis teams operate during weekdays, and 1 team operates during evening and weekend shifts. With this small coverage, county-wide crisis response cannot happen with certainty or speed. Leaving behavioral health needs to law enforcement has resulted in needless deaths of Black people in our county. Last summer, 21-year-old Ryan LeRoux, a Black man experiencing mental distress, was killed in a hail of 23 bullets while sitting in his car. Behavioral health crisis services were not available due to low staffing.<sup>1</sup>

The violent escalation tactics used by police during the encounter with Ryan LeRoux are reflective of the type of violence suffered by Black people throughout the nation at the hands of law enforcement. Police are not the best option for responding to calls involving mental health, particularly when Black people are in distress.

Recently the County announced plans to hire peer support staff to accompany its therapists; this will result in a staff of 44, or a total of 5-6 teams available during the busiest periods for the entire county. Clearly, this expansion falls short of the comprehensive need of a county of more than a million people, forcing police to be diverted from fighting crime to fill the gap in coverage. Thus, people with behavioral health crises will continue to remain at risk of being seriously hurt or killed during law enforcement interactions. Based on the number and complexity of calls, and anticipated increase in calls with the July launch of 988, the County needs a minimum of 14 mobile units available.

The County's 2023 budget request for crisis services, including mobile crisis units, is \$9.4 million, which is insufficient to meet actual need. The budget request for the police department is more than 31 times that size: \$295, 656, 915.

Ryan LeRoux would be alive today had the County budget reflected a commitment to true public safety.

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<sup>1</sup> Police statements show a police negotiator was enroute, only two minutes away, before officers on the scene opened fire on LeRoux.